

LEARNING WITH EACH OTHER, IN ANOTHER WAY



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CONTEXT

I have been Cégep Garneau's Pedagogical Counsellor since 2013. I coach professors throughout their careers, providing professional and personal development that also includes feedback related to their teaching abilities, as assessed by students. Over three years, some 7,000 students' comments were gathered. My specific role is to assist professors in terms of self-reflection by creating a space where they feel free to express themselves and enrich their teaching practice. One day a literature professor asked me if I had completed an assessment of my own professional practices, and what my areas of development would be.

This article is something of a response to that question.

Many suns rise again over the country of my birth (Unofficial translation)
nipimutenan

just as there is summer there is distance between us (Unofficial translation)
Natasha Kanapé Fontaine¹

There are encounters in our lives that fundamentally alter our relationship with history, one another, and ourselves. There are professional experiences that suddenly overturn our notions of the nature of our work or profession. These events are akin to tidal waves, crashing into our lives and forcing us to swim in a different way, with a different stroke. I lived this in 2011 at Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam, on the Côte-Nord, and this article is my pedagogical reflection on the experience of teaching French as a second language to Indigenous students. I hope that this article may serve every professor regardless of academic discipline, and regardless of the heritage of the students in their classes.

When I first undertook that project in 2011, I had been teaching French for over 10 years, and I felt well equipped and secure in my pedagogical and teaching abilities. I stepped onto that tiny airplane with a great deal of hope - as well as a few worries - packed in alongside my French teacher's clothing, dictionaries, course syllabi, and books about teaching in Indigenous settings. When I got there I lived in the Innu community of Uashat (located near Sept-Îles), in the home of Ernest Dominique, an internationally acclaimed Innu painter. At the time, I had never even heard of the artist, and to be honest, I knew little of him and culture of the sixteen Indigenous adults who were registered in the First Nations' condensed undergraduate program in French, offered by Nikanite at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC).

My passage in Innu territory gave me new insight into my pedagogical practices as well as my posture. Much like Chomsky (2012), I remain convinced that education consists of not only "filling brains" but also of preparing intellects for learning, guiding the development of individual capacities, and helping to foster creative and independent individuals. In order to accomplish this, one must be prepared to be changed by students, to create a relationship

with them, and be open with them. In Indigenous culture, this relationship is at the heart of everything². That is exactly what my Northern students taught me: a way of hearing one another, of regarding one another, and understanding and learning from one another. That dance requires us to take a step towards other people, whether they be Indigenous, non-Native, adolescent, adult, or students in science, philosophy, or in the trades. In this spirit, I invite readers to start their dance today, with four steps towards that other person— the student in your class, in your program, on your campus – these steps are life path, understanding, communication and experiences, and cultural approach.

¹ Natasha Kanapé Fontaine is Innu, originally from Pessamit. She is a poet, activist, actor, and visual artist.

² First and foremost, I would like readers to note that I am not Indigenous, nor a specialist in Indigenous culture. My goal here is simply to share what I have learnt from what I perceived as a traditional Indigenous approach.



FIRST DANCE STEP: LIFE PATH

Author Pierre Demers (2010) inspired me greatly when I was planning my course back in 2011; he asserts that a quintessential moment occurs in class with Indigenous students - when one meets another person. Introduce yourself to them, look them in the eye, talk to them about yourself – what you like and what is important to you, and invite them to do the same, and listen to them. Above all, one should take the time to create relationships and make space for emotions within class. The aforementioned are just some of the concepts and practises that I have committed to memory and act upon, even to this day. Allain and Pelletier support these notions in their work with Demers (2013); a traditional Indigenous approach is key in reducing distance between teachers and students, and promotes authentic communication and fosters trust within the group. Professor Pierre Demers is a specialist in Indigenous Language instruction, who uses the methods he espouses in his classes, as well as during conferences where he speaks. I have been to many of his presentations, and each time, he introduced each and every one of the people in the room, regardless of how many people were present, regardless of how long it took. I did the same thing with Innu students that I taught, and I was amazed by the effectiveness of this approach in terms of establishing a strong student-teacher relationship, even at the very beginning of a semester. I continue to use this method of relationship-fostering with students to this day, whether students are Indigenous or non-Native.

Each student is a unique individual with their own perspective of the world, their version of spirituality and religion, their own strengths and weaknesses. If a student is present in the classroom or lecture hall, they have likely chosen to be there. From an Indigenous viewpoint, everyone is respected for their inherent wholeness, life experiences, and life path. A relationship of trust is a vital and acknowledged link between students and educators, and it cannot exist without sharing and care.

According to Demers (2010), this relationship of shared trust is crucial to an environment where Indigenous students – and I would add from professional experience, all students – can learn. This trust is alive in the classroom or lecture hall, and requires care. To this effect, Wright (2017) notes that there exist two critical factors for professorial success: pedagogical abilities (clearness, organization of materials and resources), and affective abilities (quality of interactions and overall rapport with students). Wright asserts that the latter abilities are often overlooked in favour of more technical concerns such as course content. Regardless, affective abilities and the relationships they foster are essential to academic success: the educator who takes an interest in their

students, interacts with them, and puts energy and effort into that relationship has a greater chance of helping their students to learn and succeed, all while offering a better overall environment.

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Demers's advice on a number of other elements related to the creation and maintenance of a student-educator relationship also inspired me: accept that you do not know everything, welcome silence, take pause when faced with disappointment or a request for physical space or something left unsaid. Further, Demers's advice to take steps towards others, tolerate ambiguity and indecision if Plans A, B, or C do not work out, and above all, be genuine at all times, making sure you are with the group, and not in front of the group. The Innu students I met taught me a lot about my pedagogical limitations; I was often destabilized when my lessons didn't unfold as I had planned or expected them to, yet each time I was able to adapt. I came to appreciate and explore those lesser-taken paths when it came to my attention that someone needed to be heard, acknowledged, and accepted. For example, I happily accepted hand-written assignments from a student who was not well-versed in word processing programs. I developed a writing project based on real events in a student's life. I also agreed to and enjoyed a rap presentation about past participles, and I often provided more time for students to complete exams³. Slowly but surely, I got used to not controlling everything, and I began to trust my intuition. That trusting relationship, developed with my students, enabled me to understand that these adjustments and changes were not dangerous nor failures – they were opportunities for personal growth and a means to share a creative spark.

³ Autumn 2018 saw the implementation of this style of academic assistance for Indigenous students at CÉGEP Garneau, after academic staff noticed that First Peoples students had reading and writing difficulties in their French language and philosophy classes (given that French was not their first language). The latter is the reason that roughly 25% additional time is provided to these students during examinations, as well as accommodations to ensure adequate assistance and supervision during test time.



→ QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT:

TEND TO AND PAY ATTENTION TO STUDENTS' LIVES

To foster a trusting relationship within the classroom, consider ways to reach out to meet the needs of each student. For example, as of the first class, ask them to individually answer some questions: Why did you pick this class? What does this course mean to you? Where are you in your educational journey? What are your expectations for this course? What grade do you want to earn? This last question can help students to establish realistic goals, and help professors determine who may need additional time and effort to achieve their goals.

Another option is to use the above questions and make it part of a shared oral expression activity, where students share their individual responses in groups, and then again in larger groups. This exercise enables students to break the ice and informally chat with each other at the start of class. For professors, this exercise can be used to take the proverbial pulse of the classroom, get to know, support, and assist individual students, as well as help to create relationships of trust between educator and student.

SECOND DANCE STEP: UNDERSTANDING

According to Charlot:

“that which is learned cannot be unlearned if it echoes within the individual, and makes sense to them.” (2002, p. 12, Unofficial translation)

Meaning and understanding are key elements when it comes to a traditional approach to Indigenous learning: explain the importance of what is being taught, and the reasoning behind the activity. A professor that is engaged in the learning process themselves is better able to self-reflect and commit to metacognition – before embarking on the subject matter.

A method that I have used to provide the classroom with some structure when teaching Indigenous students, is making one student responsible for time. That “timekeeper” stops the lecture roughly every 20 minutes so students can shift gears and work on a practical activity individually or in groups. When course time is divided like this, groups will inevitably discover their knowledge is uneven; as a result, students will often become engaged and committed to helping each other learn, together. Groups then teach, explain, and provide examples for each other, and the educator can add details or refinement. This inductive method of learning is thought to improve individual engagement while actively learning. Further, it offers the possibility of adjustment when that is needed, confirming acquired knowledge, and mutual contribution to a co-constructive learning environment that is both sound and dynamic for professors as well as students, be they Indigenous or non-Native.

→ QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES, REGARDLESS OF THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT:

PROVIDE CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

Students often know far more than we give them credit for. Trust that your group has its own unique intelligence, so find out what knowledge the group has, and plan your lessons to reflect the learning that needs to be accomplished – both individually and collectively. Professors need to do a good job of marketing and selling the importance and relevance of what they teach, below are some possible ways to accomplish this.

- Involve each student personally as quickly as possible;
- Offer a challenge that stimulates cognitively, that has a time-restriction, or has special stipulations;
- Stimulate engagement through a variety of activities that fit with students' characters and thoughts;
- Enable students to share their own stories and interpretations of learning with others in their group;
- Open a space so students can share (and therefore validate) their own personal understanding of the subject matter.



THIRD DANCE STEP: COMMUNICATION AND EXPERIENCE

As per Demers (2010), orality and oral tradition are key elements of Indigenous learning and knowledge. Oral expression enables students to create their own experiential body of knowledge, which in turns permits them to incorporate theories internally, enables them to make connections between the subject matter and their own lives, and helps them actively engage with knowledge. Demers goes on to state that offering activities where students are encouraged to share, learn together, and create an authentic environment are ways to promote learning. Notably, this approach provides space to establish or grow relationships, and lets spoken languages actively welcome different

ways of learning. Puren (2012) refers to this phenomenon as “experiential knowledge” and asserts that it has a profound effect on knowledge retention. As an Innu student once told me: “Grandmother⁴ doesn't teach you how to make moccasins, she just does it. You can't learn how to sew beads on a moccasin with just words, you have to do it, together.” Innu students taught me that knowledge is first and foremost an exchange (and that “Tout est dans la manière” – “It is all in the way you do it” – as Daniel Bélanger sings). While this phenomenon is far from new, it has echoes in social constructivism.

→ QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES, REGARDLESS OF THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT:

FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION

Professors are not simply there to write on the board or show a presentation – instead, focus on helping learners navigate the subject matter themselves. Above and beyond a learning philosophy, social constructivism is a position taken and a choice made by a professor while creating a course: what do I want my students to experience, and what experience do I want to share with them during each course, and throughout the semester? How can I design this so that exchanges and sharing are at the heart of my planning?⁵ In more concrete terms, there are some practical acts that can foster and create a space for speaking and sharing:

- Arrange desks into a semi-circle shape, or in work groups;
- Plan for pauses where everyone can move about and express what they have learnt to a fellow student;
- Invite students to summarize in one or a few words what they have learnt about something and write that word on the board;
- Create a definition or conceptual map via group work, etc.

To this end, Glaserfeld asserts that knowledge is, “always the result of a construction of some kind, and as a result, cannot be transferred to a passive receiver: it must be actively built by each student.” (1993, p. 22; unofficial translation). Before even broaching subject matter, professors should seek to create realistic pedagogical situations that will inspire students to engage personally with the material, thereby spurring on reflection, critical thinking, and trial and error. All the aforementioned elements create a dynamic where students can be active, participative learners, who are present in all respects.

*You are there
I am here
It is at your place that you help me hear the Earth*
Joséphine Bacon⁶

FOURTH DANCE STEP: A CULTURAL APPROACH

Building upon the steps taken towards a life path, understanding, communication and experience, the fourth step is a cultural approach. As per Falardeau and Simard (2011), when pedagogical opportunities are offered in a culturally aware context, students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and invested in their learning and coursework. According to these authors, cultural elements are inseparable from linguistic elements and thus together they are

⁴ A respected Innu Elder.

⁵ In order to enhance the learning together approach, since autumn 2018, Indigenous students at CÉGEP Garneau have a space reserved for their usage only, as well as a dedicated resource person, and if they so chose they can partake of activities whose purpose is to support their academic perseverance and success. This initiative is included in PAREA research (Programme d'aide à la recherche sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage), lead by Julie Mareschal and Geneviève Marchand, both professors at CÉGEP Garneau, and by Anne-Andrée Denault from CÉGEP de Trois-Rivières, with the participation of professors from CÉGEP Limoilou and CÉGEP Sainte-Foy.

⁶ Joséphine Bacon is an Innu poet from Pessamit. She is a spokesperson, filmmaker, and visionary poet for many Indigenous and non-Native Peoples.



essential when learning is the goal. Pairing cultural awareness with linguistic knowledge enables students to consider their personal relationship to language and culture, and actively engage with them. This relationship with knowledge is in fact translatable to all cultures and subject matter, if one considers that science is but one language that decodes the world in its own way. Each professor has the ability to transform their classroom or lecture hall into a place of sharing, learning, and they themselves may even become “passeur de culture” (transmitter of culture), as per Zakhartchouk in his 1999 work “L’enseignant, un passeur culturel.”

Demonstrating cultural awareness of students is an approach that can easily be translated to any discipline, to any sort of student.

By simply talking with and listening to Innu students in my classes, I learned a great deal about their language’s structure and sentiments, as well as their rich history of art and their worldview. As a result, I integrated various cultural elements and art forms (literature, songs, sewing, painting, pottery, and so on) into how I taught. My goal was to use language as a starting point, and combine as much Indigenous content as possible, thus ensuring that they would be able to share their culture, opinions, and perspectives on the subject matter. While teaching Innu students, I came to realize that though I thought I was bringing a particular culture to the north, it was in fact my Indigenous students that were transmitting their culture to me – I was merely a visitor, learning and experiencing a unique and rich culture that was not my own.

I more or less taught the same theoretical content, but applied the principles of cultural safety, and so used poems by Nathasa Kanapé Fontaine to illustrate the past participle, or the song Plan Nord by Samian to demonstrate a coherent and critical point of view, or arguments from the Idle No More Movement to illustrate the complex relationship between cause, effect, and explanation. I combined this with a sincere cultural and oral pedagogical practice while using active, experiential planning where the classroom existed to help students move about while they learned individually or in teams, so that each student could establish their own personal relationship to cultural and linguistic knowledge. In class, students enjoyed discussing Indigenous literature, painters and artists, legends and so much more; being in regular contact with works originating from their culture, but expressed in the French language enabled them to become their own “agents of cultural production” (Gérin-Lajoie, 2010). This intertwining of cultures enabled students to: interpret their cultural stories and symbols through the French language; become their own interpreters of their knowledge; improve their linguistic abilities. Through this combined method, students are able to locate a genuine echo within themselves, that links the subject matter that is learned, with lived experience and culture.

CONCLUSION: HOW MY STORY WAS CHANGED...

In Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam, I had to step out of my comfort zone and known routines and try to dance a new dance. I needed to put aside my typical teaching methods, and instead was able to learn traditional Indigenous approaches which incorporate social constructivism and humanism. I learned so much: nowadays, I am an educator with my eyes wide open,

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES, REGARDLESS OF THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT:

AN IN-CLASS CULTURAL APPROACH

An educational approach that includes cultural safety helps to unite the senses and what is sensed (Gohier, 2002). The act of applying cultural safety as a pedagogical strategy in our educational institutions means being aware of student origins, whether they be Innu, Montrealer, from the Beauce region, affected by social issues, parents, immigrants, and so on. There are even generational differences between cultures and eras (Generations Y, X, etc.) that are worth taking note of and respecting. Our goal as educators is to guide and transmit, while inspiring a thirst for knowledge, learning about on another’s culture, and sharing the interconnectedness of knowledge and differing points of view. An educator who is culturally aware can become a conduit for the transmission of their subject matter’s culture and language, all the way down to the students they teach, or perhaps be a figure that provides additional knowledge and details to help frame a subject in a familiar way. This is an affective and cognitive pedagogical stance that creates a sort of safety net that enables students to engage, and give the effort required to accomplish a given task, because they feel heard by their professors, and do not feel estranged from the subject matter. Students have cultural safety⁷, regardless of origin, generation, or culture.

⁷ According to Emanuelle Dufour, “cultural safety... can be defined as the creation of potential that results from the development of an offer of services that respects and acknowledges historical, cultural, socioeconomic, political and epistemological determinants of the targeted population” (2015, p. 39). (Unofficial translation).



two ears ready to listen, a heart that is welcoming... and a very small mouth! I take the role of speaker less often, and as a result I feel that I can foster sincere relationships with students, all while feeling personally confident and grounded.

Changing direction to a teaching method that is more focused on humanism and active participation, has enabled me to better understand my role, have a more nuanced view of myself, and has even changed my conception of education. I now believe that in order for any pedagogical method to truly function, it must be welcoming, take cultural safety into account, be motivating, leave space for emotions, inspire, and provide the opportunity to understand difference and the world around us – and we need to learn together. Demonstrating cultural awareness of students is an approach that can easily be translated to any discipline, to any sort of student. Further, it enables individuals to apply critical thinking to real-life problems, synthesize heard and received information for collective benefit, so that all learning can become learning that is of the senses, and is sensed.

Since my time in Uashat, when planning courses or workshops, I keep in mind the importance of sharing (in pairs or groups or round tables) when considering pedagogical direction. Little by little, I seek to become a facilitator, a coach, and a transmitter of culture that bridges the gap between learning and students. My greatest goal is for the groups I work with to experience a transformation in their relationship with learning, with Another, with the world, and of course, with themselves. Even as a pedagogical counsellor, I take this same stance: I may seemingly have nothing to teach, yet I feel that I have a great deal to share with and learn from Another, above all with Another.

One dance step at a time.
One student at a time.
One prof at a time.
Everyone has their own life path. ●

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